



Staff Specialist Survival Course

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Mickey Thomas, a staff specialist in the Office of Secretary of Defense (OSD), looked down as her phone rang for the third time in less than an hour. She immediately recognized the number and knew that the program office was calling again. She knew also that the phone call would center on a request: “When could we get a milestone decision on the program?”

It had been this way for the last 30 days ever since they completed the Overarching Integrated Product Team (OIPT) meeting. The program was ready to move forward into the next phase of development, but many members of the OSD staff, including Mickey, were not totally convinced about the viability of the program and its approaches. In fact, some offices had suggested changes to the approach that were completely different not only from the program offices’ approach but also from those of the other staff offices. How was she to pull together these diverse opinions and craft a decision presentation for the Milestone Decision Authority (MDA)?

Fortunately for “Mickey” and all other staff specialists facing a similar dilemma, there is a way to learn the tools and gain the insights needed to find a solution. The Defense System Management College, located on the Fort Belvoir, Virginia, campus of the Defense Acquisition University, offers a course specifically developed for staff specialists—ATL 900. This course provides not

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only problem-solving solutions, critical thinking skills and the latest on acquisition topics but also networking opportunities for civilian and military officers assigned to the OSD staff. The syllabus for this 4.5-day course addresses the challenges for today's staff specialists and provides not only hands-on review of actual artifacts but also case studies to enhance learners' actual experiences.

Background

The course was designed to magnify the staff specialist's skills in acquisition acumen and critical thinking. These areas of expertise add to the staff specialist's tool box. We enhance the experience with the case study techniques to provide the experience without exposure to failure.

Acquisition Acumen—It's All About the Risks

Risk Management is at the heart of the product development process and is the essence of the Milestone A, B and C decisions

- Has risk in all its forms been reduced to the level needed to make the next major commitment?
- Are the plans to mitigate risk going forward sound?

— Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Frank Kendall, July 2013

Understanding risk in all its various forms (technical, financial, and schedule) provides the core of the initial learning plan. This involves not only risk identification but an evaluation of the risk assessment made by the program office. A staff specialist looks for risks in the various artifacts that the program produces as it moves toward a milestone decision. The ability to understand, compare, and contrast the contents of the documents is a key staff specialist skill. Using real versions of these documents in the classroom exposes the learner to the documents' intent and provides an understanding of the formats used.

Building Critical Thinking Skills

The ability to think critically is the basis for making good decisions. Rather than just accept the alternative delivered for your consideration, shouldn't you ask why this is the best alternative? Understanding the costs and benefits of any alternative means that you not only need to understand why the protagonist is putting it forward but also its benefits to other interested parties—the stakeholders. This includes how the proposed government action impacts industry or how it would be perceived by industry—our business partners in any acquisition action.

Finally, before you evaluate any proposal, you need to understand the biases we all carry in our virtual backpacks. Unknowingly applying a sunk cost, confirming evidence, or status quo bias can trap a decision maker or staff specialist in a decision that is not justified. Knowing your biases and those of others

in the decision chain can allow you to shape the discussion so that the best option at least gets considered.

Experience Without Exposure

The case study method is a time-tested means of providing learners with hands-on experience in a safe academic environment. The prestigious Harvard Business School uses this method of teaching to provide captains of industry the knowledge and experience to manage multinational corporations. Using similar teaching methodology, the staff specialist is immersed in cases that provide real (but disguised) acquisition decisions. This process not only allows the learner to make proposals and decisions based on the evidence at hand (a very real situation for any staff officer) but also provides a sense of realism that would be lost in a purely academic exercise. Fortunately, the environment faced by today's staff specialists is ripe with opportunities for providing case experience. As a culmination to each of the case exercises, following a general discussion about the findings and recommendations, one of the teams provides its recommendation to an MDA (either a DAU or OSD-level executive). This final presentation requirement provides the added dose of realism for each of the learners.

Some Recent Student Assessments of the Course


"Coming into this course—I thought it was going to be a waste of valuable and limited time. However, this course has actually been beneficial especially the interactions with others I typically don't interface with as well as a refresher on functional areas (FM [Financial Management], SE [Systems Engineering], TE [Test and Evaluation], etc.)."

"Very useful, I learned new techniques and now have a plan to improve the manner in which I advise on major programs. Thanks again for the investment."

"It has been a good use of time. I have greatly benefited from the senior level experience and discussion about how to look at problems."

Summary

Fortunately, Mickey was a recent graduate of the ATL 900 course. Using the skills she learned and her network of other graduates on the OSD staff, she was able to quickly consolidate the disparate comments and provide a sound recommendation for the MDA. In the end, the right decision was reached. Although not everyone was happy (satisfaction never is universal), all agreed that they had had a fair opportunity to be heard.

If you think this class will make a difference in your career, contact course manager Peter Czech at (703) 805-4973 (or email Peter.Czech@dau.mil) to apply for the ATL 900 class. 

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